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## THE ELEMENTS OF THE TRANSLATION OF LATIN<sup>1</sup>

To say that adequate translation is difficult and perfect translation impossible is perhaps only another way of saying that translation belongs to the company of the arts, all aiming at an unattainable end, all "armed", as Stevenson puts it, "with a tube of superior flake-white to paint the portrait of the insufferable sun!" Certainly the difficulty of translation is closely bound up with its inexhaustible interest. One may try again and again, as all its amateurs know, year after year, constantly bettering one's translation, yet as far as ever from complete satisfaction.

The question might reasonably be raised why an art so difficult as the translation of Latin into English should be attempted as early in education as we do attempt it. Yet the question after all is an idle one, for difficult as it is to use translation in the earlier years of the study of the language, it would probably be more difficult still to dispense with it. What needs to be clearly distinguished here is the immense difference between our own difficulties and problems as translators of Latin and the difficulties of a young student still engaged in learning the language. It is a difference not only of extent, but of kind.

For in the first place, mature minds judge and criticize translations as wholes. Matthew Arnold, in his essay *On Translating Homer* easily condemned all existing translations by the use of a few adjectives. This translation is not rapid in its movement, that is not noble in its style, he said, and it was idle to urge that this or that detail of the original had been faithfully reproduced. Even leaving out of sight the more subtle questions of style, and considering translation merely as the rendering of one language into another, adequate translation is one long process of sacrifice, compromise and adaptation, the sacrifice of the part to the whole, of the letter to the spirit. Now this whole is for us, of course, the Latin original. That is the real thing of which our translations seem only shadowy and distorted reflections. With a young student just beginning to learn to read, the case is reversed. It is the original which he sees in a glass darkly, through the medium of his own translation. The original does not exist for him as a substantive thing, but as a collection of fragments out of which he may piece together his translation. There is, besides, something in a young mind which makes the parts seem greater than the whole, something which cannot see the forest for the trees,

which finds untruth in any substitute or compromise, and must have the letter or miss the spirit. So that at the outset the student is doubly hampered as regards translation, by this youthful literalism and by his imperfect perception of the original. I am speaking not of what ought to be, but of what is.

Nothing is easier than to tell a student of Latin, even the youngest, exactly how to proceed in translation. He does not go wrong for lack of good advice. These directions, often very cleverly and tellingly put, seem almost pathetic, if one succeeds in taking, even partially, the student's point of view. The words are true, absolutely true, true as Cassandra's warnings to the Trojans, and sometimes quite as useless. "Read the Latin first without translating" they generally begin. Ah yes, if they could do that at the outset, this difficulty and many another would be at an end. Ordinary boys and girls, left to themselves, translate *words*. If that does not seem to answer, they translate as much of the syntax as is absolutely necessary, treating the order as a mere impediment. To get their point of view, one must look at syntax, order, and vocabulary as separate elements in the translation problem. Obviously the special phase of that problem presented by Latin to English speaking people is this: on the one hand we have a rather inflexible, but clear, logical and consistent syntax, a curiously limited vocabulary and the freest possible order, on the other a loose and flexible syntax, a vocabulary embarrassed by its own riches and a somewhat rigid word-order, in which many places have been as it were preempted for purposes of syntax.

Let us then consider syntax first as an element in translation. In that continual sacrifice of the parts to the whole which makes translation, no sacrifice is more necessary or common or profitable than that of the outward form and body of the syntax. When Livy says, for example, "*Angebant ingentis spiritus virum Sicilia Sardiniaque amissae*", no mature mind would object to the translation 'It was torture to the towering pride of the man that Sicily and Sardinia had been lost', though every word has undergone a grammatical change, for no law of syntax has been broken, no grammatical meaning altered. Few would prefer as a translation 'The loss of Sicily and Sardinia distressed the proud-spirited man', where somewhat closer resemblance in syntax is gained at the cost of order and emphasis. Still fewer would choose 'Sicily and Sardinia, having been lost, distressed the man of proud spirit', where the syntax is imitated in detail at the cost of almost everything else worth having. It is only too obvious that in the translation of Latin the syntax requires very great freedom of

<sup>1</sup>This paper was presented at the meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle States and Maryland, at New York, April 27, 1907.

treatment, a freedom of which our young student is at first incapable. He is capable of taking great liberties with the syntax, of disregarding it altogether, of trampling it underfoot, but this complete freedom of handling combined with absolute respect for the essential meanings and relations of syntax is at first beyond him. Such syntax as he observes and takes account of he tends to reproduce literally in translation. The effect on his translation is wholly unfortunate. Here is one great source of the Latin English that we all know and deplore, the Latin English so deliciously ridiculed in the story Concerning a Youth who was unable to lie, attributed to Professor Lane of Harvard.

But after all is not a sound instinct at work here? Can any sort of freedom be conferred or acquired all at once? Are not lawlessness and mental confusion the alternative of this early literalism, rather than freedom? The danger of this lawlessness in the early years of Latin study seems one of the most serious dangers we have to meet. I do not believe that it can be exaggerated, or that it is fully appreciated. A false idea is prevalent that we know very little English grammar and nevertheless get on extremely well without it. We may indeed know very little consciously, and in all probability learned very little in school, but the fundamental things in English syntax, all of us, literate and illiterate, learned in our infancy. We learned for example a great many words which exist in English for the purpose of expressing relations between other words. We learned many combinations of order, which have for us an irresistible grammatical meaning. Much of this we can carry over and use more or less unconsciously in modern languages. But Latin goes about these things so differently that a whole new set of mental habits has to be formed. Until they are to some extent formed, nothing else seems of equal consequence, not even better translation. To understand the ultimate horror of the state of mind that threatens our students, we must imagine that in English 'You will die', and 'They are dead' meant at first sight very much the same thing, that in the sentence 'Cain killed Abel' the reader relied mainly on his knowledge of Biblical history to determine who was the murderer, that all our adjectives and pronouns had to be distributed and applied by general appropriateness alone. To get the simpler and more fundamental facts of syntax recognized, observed, acted upon is one of the greatest early difficulties, especially with young Americans, who can not conceive of a rule or law as ever seriously intended to impede or control action. Now we all know how much of the difficulty or ease of learning a construction depends on its *translatability*. Why else should

so simple a matter as the agreement of the gerundive be a constant stumbling-block? Why else must we carefully teach that *parcere* for example, is followed by the dative, while *cedere* looks out for itself, so to speak? We all know the persistency with which young students, with the facts staring them in the face from the printed page, will still parse from their translations. As long, then, as mental confusion exists in connection with any particular construction the confusion may easily be confounded by free translation. But as soon as its essential meaning is so thoroughly mastered that it is recognized under any disguise, freedom in translation, so far as that construction is concerned, is not only possible but distinctly desirable. To take a simple example, the useful and common expedient of rendering an active by a passive construction can be safely allowed only when the confusion concerning the voice of verbs is well at an end. Thus the student must work out his freedom bit by bit, point by point, steadily but gradually. If we check his literal tendencies before the time, we shall be "drawing a circle premature, greedy for quick returns of profit", and our bargain will indeed be a bad one, even as regards translation. For translation worthy the name presupposes power to read, and power to read is impossible without this practical grasp of syntax.

I have already touched upon the point that a great deal of our manipulation of syntax in Latin comes from a desire to retain the order. For we all recognize in the Latin freedom of order a veritable gift to the language, one that helps out its deficiencies in all sorts of ways and in particular lends a constant element of beauty to what might otherwise have been a somewhat rigid and unlovely language. In reading we depend on the order; we get all sorts of hints, sidelights and suggestions from it. In translation, we earnestly and sometimes despairingly endeavor to reproduce its effects in English, learning incidentally a great deal about English order and the many devices by which our own language has striven to escape the bondage of a fixed order. Even for young students *reading* in the order is perfectly possible under direction. But the distinction between reading and translation is not clear to them, and, when they are left to themselves, such approaches to reading as they make tend to set aside the Latin order as merely troublesome and irrational. They want an order that will *translate*. We know the concessions that used to be made to this weakness in the *ordo* that was furnished, in poetry, at least, in our grandfathers' time. Another difficulty is that the children have at first no conscious knowledge of English order, only a set of instincts. Mental habits

which they do not understand hold them fast. It is like wrestling with a phantom. If the student, with commendable docility, is making an effort to read in the order, he tends to translate in it. For an example of the very complex and to him mysterious difficulties that may be encountered here, we need not go beyond the first chapter of Caesar. Gaul, we learn there, is divided into three parts, 'one of which the Belgae inhabit' (here the object precedes the verb and the subject, but so it naturally does in English), 'another the Aquitani' (here the object may precede, but with some sense of difficulty), 'the third they who are called Celts in their own tongue, Gauls in ours' (here the order in English is quite forced and almost impossible). Yet the three clauses are perfectly symmetrical in structure. It is only by translation that we discover such facts as these about the order of modifiers in English, that we may speak of a densely crowded street, but not of a crowded with people street, or that, having *aliae multae* and *magnae* as modifiers of the same *virtutes*, we must say 'many other great' in English, no other arrangement being possible. No wonder our young students abandon the attempt to reproduce the order. Yet they must not abandon it, for the Latin order can be retained in translation, and must be retained in most cases if the translation is not to suffer. It may even be retained surprisingly often without altering the form of the syntax. 'Behind the rider sits black Care', 'Fine gratitude you are showing to the Roman people', 'Down fall the pine trees', 'This I pray, this last cry I pour out with my blood', are but a few random instances out of many where English shows itself tractable. However, the usual condition of reproducing the Latin order in translation without violence to English is the free handling of syntax previously referred to. As that becomes more and more possible with the student's increasing knowledge, the order may more and more be kept. This is of course a wonderful gain to the translation itself and also a great stimulus to reading in the order.

I have kept the consideration of word meanings until the last, though it is the first point that engages the young student's attention. His devotion to his vocabulary is even excessive; yet his efforts bear singularly little fruit, and nowhere is he more in need of guidance. The difficulty here arises from the comparative smallness of the Latin vocabulary and the consequent necessity for considering every word not as a separate unit but in relation to all the context. Nothing more directly forces the student to the effort, at first unwelcome, of considering a sentence as a whole. The fact that Latin gives us comparatively few words to memorize is

not appreciated by the young student. Very gladly, if *consilium* might only be always 'plan', would they memorize additional words for advice and purpose and strategy and diplomacy and all the little army of English words which *consilium* represents. It requires an intelligent comparison of the two languages to see that *consilium* does always mean something like planning, but that English calls this planning by different names according to the circumstances under which it is done, while Latin contents itself with one, trusting to the context to make its application clear. A boy is very unlikely to make this discovery unassisted. What he desires at first is not the essential meaning of the Latin word at all, but a convenient English tag to attach to it. The trouble with *consilium* is that the English tags are so numerous. *invidia*, the fear of which so possesses Cicero's imagination in the Catilines, not only may but must be translated in various places unpopularity, hostility, criticism, disfavor, reproach. It is a real feat for a young mind to recognize essential similarity in these different and not altogether synonymous words. And what of the cases where there is not any English tag to attach? what of *versari* and *afficere*? What most of all of the many cases where the translation word is not the meaning, all those metaphors not at home in English for which some different expression must be substituted? The natural early desire not to stop over the essential meaning, but to take the shortest cut to an English equivalent has been, I must believe, strengthened by the fact that Caesar's vocabulary is the first the student encounters; it is used now in most beginning books. The immediate gain in economy of effort is doubtless great, and the practice probably justifiable; yet it is a pity to get a technical vocabulary first, to make the acquaintance of *ponere* in the sense of pitching a camp, to have one's first Latin sentences full of legions, cohorts, fortifications and military maneuvers, objects and operations more or less misty and remote. For this sense of unreality in regard to the Latin words cripples translation doubly, by putting yet another hindrance in the way of real reading of the Latin. For what reading wants of a word is the real meaning, not an English word at all; what translation wants is the English word which will convey that meaning under the given circumstances, often not a translation of the word at all.

In secondary school work this difficulty reaches an acute stage in Vergil, that is, if it has not been successfully dealt with before that. Even then Vergil offers the best opportunity for distinguishing essential meanings from translation equivalents, or, if one looks at it in another way, the greatest danger of confounding the two. His intolerance

of anything commonplace or hackneyed in diction, his desire for words and metaphors that will bite and tell are carried to a point that would be harshness in prose. This characteristic of Vergil has not been even remotely imitated in any translation that I know. In school translations everything tends to be smoothed away, blurred and effaced. Tennyson uses words as Vergil does when he writes of "breasting the blows of circumstance", or speaks of trees as "clothing their branchy bowers with fifty Mays", or writes "Climb thy thick noon, disastrous day". Imagine commonplace expressions substituted for all these unusual ones. Yet this is what happens to Vergil in our schools. So that here, if not before, the essential meaning must be insisted upon as something distinct from a translation substitute. Here, if not before, we must know that *petere* means aim at and *ponere* set down. Once interested in the essential meaning of Latin words, the variation of that meaning by context and the possibilities of expressing it in English, one is well started on one of those happy roads that never come to an end. Which of us is not still trying to get a better rendering for some particular *studium* or *virtus*, and still hoping to find precisely the right expression some day? When one's students set out upon this quest, one gets a strong sense of intellectual comradeship with them.

It seems, then, that the whole process of learning to translate Latin is a gradual and progressive liberation of the mind, in which realities emerge and detach themselves from what is accidental or unimportant in their outward form. The student begins in a kind of mental bondage, partly to the literalism inseparable from youth, partly to his own language, whose forms and habits are identical to him with thought itself. But when he has learned to translate Latin even as well as he may, under favorable conditions, in our schools, when he has learned to treat syntax freely but never lawlessly, to accept and find at last rational and helpful a thing at first so repellent to his unconscious instincts as Latin order, and to recognize by constant comparison of the Latin and the English vocabulary that all words are more or less unsuccessful attempts to express thought, he has gone a long way toward mental enfranchisement, he is to a certain extent at least the master and not the slave of language. When by a growing power to read he comes to see his original clearly, he feels increasing dissatisfaction with his own attempts to copy it, and I know of nothing more hopeful for English work than the intensity of effort to which translation, as it were, provokes and challenges the more intelligent students.

Little has been said about ways and means. Prob-

ably, as Kipling said of tribal lays, "there are nine and sixty ways" of teaching translation and "every single one of them is right". But I venture to say that no one of the sixty-nine can be applied with the best effect without the constant effort to put one's self mentally in the student's place and to guide him along, without pausing, it is true, but also without haste or impatience.

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## REVIEWS

Euripides and the Spirit of His Dramas. By Paul Decharme, translated by James Loeb. New York: The Macmillan Co. (1906). Pp. xxii + 392. \$3.00.

The late Professor Decharme's *Euripide et L'Esprit de son Theatre* (1893) is widely known among students of Euripides. This analysis of Euripides' temperament, intellectual tendencies and dramatic work rests on a more profound study of the dramas themselves than has characterized any that preceded it.

Though to the most tragic of poets the Athenians themselves and posterity alike have granted but the third place among Greek tragedians, his work has been more widely read, studied and discussed than that of any other Greek dramatist and in a sense his plays are popular to-day. At the present time the psychology of the Euripidean dramas appears to interest the cultivated public more than the perfection of Sophocles or the grandeur of Aeschylus. Attacks on his art and morals are no longer in fashion; Professor Decharme points out that it is equally absurd to criticize him for the innovations in the construction of his dramas and for his philosophic attitude toward the myths about the Olympians which constituted the popular religion of his day.

Euripides and Socrates both were accused of corrupting the young and of teaching atheism. Plato interpreted Socrates for the after-world in such fashion that he has come to connote almost perfect goodness and wisdom. Euripides was less fortunate; he had as his exponent not the great philosopher but Aristophanes, the greatest genius that ever wrote comedy, *advocatus diaboli* indeed in his case as in that of Socrates.

Professor Decharme deplors the fact that the Aristophanic judgment of Euripides has still too wide currency even among those who love the tragic poet. This book shows abundantly how in these latter days Euripides has come into his own after the period in which bitter vituperation of him was in fashion in Germany (with the great exception of Goethe) and in other lands where Ger-